

HELP ALONG THE WAY

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TURNING CHALLENGES INTO VICTORIES

BY CHRIS ZANG | PHOTOS BY DANA RAMPOLLA

The University of Maryland, Baltimore's program to hire individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities was winning Employer of the Year Awards in the early to mid-2000s from the Maryland Department of Disabilities, the *Baltimore Business Journal*, Maryland Works, and others.

But the program still wasn't where Vassie Hollamon, then facilities manager, wanted it. "We hadn't really done much to develop *our* skills as managers," recalls Hollamon, who had reached out to The Arc Baltimore for qualified candidates to fill jobs in the Housekeeping Department. "I was starting to look around for examples — things I could or should be doing."

The guidance Hollamon was seeking came in a parting gift from Joanna Falcone, who was leaving The Arc. It was a VHS tape she gave Hollamon of a program out of Cincinnati Children's Hospital called Project SEARCH.



THE DUO WHO LAUNCHED PROJECT SEARCH AT UMB, VASSIE HOLLAMON AND JOANNA FALCONE, WITH EARNEST WOODARD, THEIR FIRST HIRE.

"So I called them, hopped on a plane to Cincinnati, went to the Children's Hospital there and was just floored by what they had," Hollamon recalls. He came back to UMB and reported his findings of a yearlong program that mentors high school seniors with disabilities, teaching them job skills and often hiring them. Then he and several UMB colleagues returned to Cincinnati to take a second look.

"Our version of the acronym KISS is 'keep it structured and systematic.' Do that and there's almost no limit to what can be done by our Project SEARCH graduates."

***— Vassie Hollamon, associate director,
Operations and Maintenance***

Afterward, an excited Hollamon met with Jerry Bullinger, then assistant executive director of employment at The Arc, telling him how UMB had to develop a partnership with The Arc, Baltimore City Public Schools, and the state Division of Rehabilitation Services to launch Project SEARCH. Hollamon recalls: "Jerry, one of the kindest gentlemen you will ever meet, said, 'That's great, what do you need from me?'"

"I told him: 'I need you to get Joanna Falcone back.'" Somehow, Bullinger granted his wish, even giving The Arc's Falcone an office on the UMB campus, and she and Hollamon have built Project SEARCH from a program with six interns in 2008 to 18 in 2018.

Though the interns do rotations in many areas at UMB and the University of Maryland Medical Center, Hollamon's Housekeeping Department has especially benefited from the program.

Anthony Wilkins, assistant director, says there are 21 housekeepers at UMB who have overcome intellectual and developmental challenges to become essential members of UMB's current facilities team.

The repetition inherent in housekeeping makes it a natural fit for those with cognitive disabilities, said Hollamon, who had experience employing them earlier at Columbia Mall.

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“I’ve described it as the instructions on the back of a shampoo bottle,” he says. “Lather, rinse, repeat. We have many, many restrooms, but they all are generally cleaned the same way. We have lots of waste containers; they’re generally emptied the same way. So while there are differences in schedules and buildings, the actual task that has to go on is routine, it’s structured, and it’s systematic. Our version of the acronym KISS is ‘keep it structured and systematic.’ Do that and there’s almost no limit to



HOWARD DISNEY WITH TWO PROJECT SEARCH INTERNS HE MENTORED AND THEN HIRED, FLOOR TECHS JAMAAL WHITE (LEFT) AND DEVONTE BEY.

what can be done by our Project SEARCH graduates.”

Devonte Bey is living proof of Hollamon’s high ceiling. Representing the Class of 2017 at Project SEARCH’s graduation last June, Bey said, “Let us be the best we can be so that we can make our lives and the lives of those closest to us be filled with happiness and pride.”

It was hard to believe the poised speaker had once been given little hope of walking or talking. As his mother, Kadijah Bey Bryan, told the 80-plus assembled, “Just because the doctors placed a label over our children’s heads does not mean that they cannot do.”

Now, she said, Devonte rides the bus by himself. Best of all, “he went out there and got a job!” said Bey Bryan, eliciting applause.

Before the graduation ceremony, she made a point of approaching Howard Disney in her wheelchair and saying, “Thanks for giving my son a chance.”

Disney, assistant director of Housekeeping, School of Dentistry, said it was he who should be thanking her. He recalled being impressed by Bey immediately. “He’s a guy where if I give him an assignment, I can say, ‘Devonte, this is what I need you to take care of’ and the minute he’s done he’s on the radio saying, ‘OK, Mr. Howard, that’s done. What do you need me to do next?’”

So in March 2017, three months before Bey’s graduation, Disney told Project SEARCH job coach Tiera Parker, “Get me his application. We’re going to get this young man hired.”

Today, Bey, 22, is a full-time employee at the School of Dentistry who enjoys his job “very much.” As a Project SEARCH intern, he pulled trash, swept floors, cleaned walls, and disposed of bio bags. “Now I’m scrubbing and burnishing floors,” he says.

Asked how he’s doing as a floor tech, Bey says, “I think I’m improving.”

He credits Disney, whom he says “is really more of a mentor than a boss.”

Bey likes the fast pace at the dental school. The most satisfying part of the job? “Knowing that I was helpful for one of the patients,” he says, giving directions or opening a door for someone with a walker. “When they say thank you, I take a lot of pride in that.”

And he quickly admits he wouldn’t have a job at UMB without Project SEARCH. “No, because before the internship I had never even heard of this place.”

GO GET IT

Several blocks away, another Howard Disney success story is working in the Housekeeping Department at the SMC Campus Center. Jamaal White, Bey’s cousin, likes to “do everything” with the floors. “First you clean the floor, then you take the wraps off, then you put the wax on it and let it sit before you can burnish it,” says White, 23, who signed up for Project SEARCH while he and Bey were at Edmondson-Westside High School. “Different floors need different things. Some take one coating, some two. I learned to do freestyle where you can hold the machine with one hand, turn your back and spin around.”

He is creative away from the Campus Center floors as well. Recent part-time jobs include home improvement and party decoration, not to mention his real passion: designing custom athletic shoes.

How many pairs? “About a thousand, my closet is full of them,” says White, who strips down the shoes, paints them, and

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applies new designs for resale. “That’s why I’m going back to college to take designing.”

Supervisor Marlene Johnson calls White “my project person” for the gusto he shows in tackling special projects. She shows a visitor a sparkling freight elevator. “This was really a mess before Jamaal cleaned it up,” Johnson says. “Now he maintains it. He listens, he pays attention, he’s easy to train, which is good because I told him if he’s interested in management, training is one part of it.”

Told that Disney liked his “go get it” attitude as a Project SEARCH intern, White smiles and says, “I see someone say you’re not going to do it. I tell myself to go get it done and make success happen.”

Proud to have his own place to live, White wakes up each day next to a motivational poster. “It tells me you gotta get up, man, you have to go to work. Go get it, go get it. That’s why I’m here [at the University].”

That pride and dedication is what makes the Project SEARCH graduates such good employees, says Hollamon. “What I have found with people with disabilities, be they physical or cognitive, is they want to be treated with dignity and respect and they want to contribute. They just have to find the right place. At UMB, we have found the right place for many Project SEARCH graduates, especially in Housekeeping.”

FIRST ARRIVAL

Talk of commitment takes Hollamon back to his first Arc Baltimore hire, Earnest Woodard. A UMB employee since 2002, Woodard today is based in the Institute of Human Virology, where he collects trash, cleans windows, and puts away supplies. He remembers his first day. “I worked on night shift in the Bressler Building.” Stints in other buildings followed. “I’ve worked in all the buildings,” says Woodard, an engaging man who likes to talk — maybe a bit too much, Hollamon jokes.

But his supervisor, Shaquel Williams, has nothing but praise. “Earnest is very helpful, respectful, and friendly,” she says. “He likes to assist his co-workers and the clients throughout the IHV building. He also has perfect attendance.”

Asked why he has such good attendance, Woodard turns serious. “If I want to get the job done, I have to come in. I can’t tell Shaquel this isn’t getting done til next week.”

He credits The Arc and Joanna Falcone for his job, for the condo he bought, and for his happy marriage.



A FREIGHT ELEVATOR IN THE SMC CAMPUS CENTER THAT “WAS REALLY A MESS,” IN SUPERVISOR MARLENE JOHNSON’S WORDS, TODAY IS SPARKLING AFTER MUCH WORK BY JAMAAL WHITE, WHO NOW MAINTAINS IT ON A REGULAR BASIS.

“Without The Arc I wouldn’t be here,” says Woodard, 59, who gives back as president of The Arc’s Helping Hands board of directors. “I would be in some sort of trouble. Now? I have to behave — pay the bills. It’s good, real good.”

All seem to agree Hollamon’s vision has been a win-win for the University and the workers.

“I enjoy being able to depend on the Housekeeping Department to provide real-life job experiences for our interns,” says Tameka Harry, Project SEARCH program manager. “The mentors are awesome! We provide them with an intern who is determined to work and the department places them. When we have that perfect match, they hire our guys. That’s so exciting!!”

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Adds Disney: “I believe Project SEARCH is a huge asset. It’s great to see people from the program learn new and useful things that can help them in life. Jamaal and Devonte are prime examples of young men willing to learn anything they can to better themselves. I hope I have had an impact on them, because they sure did have an impact on me.”

Falcone, senior director of competitive employment at The Arc, also has glowing words for the program — and Hollamon.

“Project SEARCH has been successful on this campus because so many people have been willing to give our interns the opportunity to learn and grow,” she says. “I believe Vassie is truly visionary in that he realized many years ago the value of including people with disabilities in the workplace and the positive

contributions they can make — and then he worked to make it happen here. Because of his actions, and the support of the rest of the Facilities Management team, many Project SEARCH interns can now proudly say they’re UMB employees — and that’s huge.”

Hollamon cites Falcone and the Cincinnati videotape with being the key.

“No one person could make this program what it is today. It really has been a set of happy circumstances,” he says. “But frankly, if I could point to any one person who has made it successful, it would be my partner and friend Joanna Falcone. Plus the many managers and supervisors who have contributed. It’s been a team effort — one I am enormously proud of.”



EARNEST WOODARD TAKES SO MUCH PRIDE IN HELPING KEEP THE INSTITUTE OF HUMAN VIROLOGY CLEAN THAT HE HAS A PERFECT ATTENDANCE RECORD.